

# A debate on the Horologium of Augustus: controversy and clarifications

Lothar Haselberger

with responses by P. J. Heslin and M. Schütz  
and additional remarks by R. Hannah and G. Alföldy

At issue is the so-called Horologium of Augustus, the most extraordinary of Rome's grand monuments, whose ancient name remains as elusive as its ancient appearance as a whole. Well preserved is its centerpiece, an Egyptian red-granite obelisk of some 230 tons with Augustus' dedicatory inscription in duplicate on its pedestal. Broken into 5 pieces and restored, it stands today in Piazza Montecitorio, some 200 m south of its original location on the Campus Martius, which is known within a few meters' range. Almost every other aspect of the Horologium, however, has come under increasing doubt. In a recent study, P. Heslin even wonders whether an Augustan horologium is no more than a "phantom" of gross scholarly misconception, claiming instead a rôle as "a hitherto unknown Domitianic monument".<sup>1</sup> What is one to make out of all this, of both the monument itself, as partially excavated by E. Buchner with F. Rakob in 1979-81, and the fierce dispute that has surrounded it now for two decades, ever since M. Schütz's massive objections to the excavators' conclusions? What can, at present, safely be said about the appearance, phases, function and meaning of this monument situated at the scholarly crossroads of archaeology, astronomy, mathematics, geometry, ancient history and urban topography? The following deliberations attempt to bring some clarity to a controversy that is more obscure than illuminating.

Fully conscious that, with Buchner's final publication still pending, this may not be the best moment to enter a discussion, I nonetheless trust in the value of debating what has been published, acknowledging with gratitude that several important voices accepted my invitation to join the endeavour.<sup>2</sup> Unknown facts will not be introduced: rather, it is a weighing the arguments, so that the *status quo* of research can be defined more clearly. At stake is not just the physical appearance of the Horologium itself, and thus a central part of the Campus Martius during the Augustan period, but also the spatial and thematic connection between Horologium and nearby *Ara Pacis Augustae*: with this stands or falls a perceived key element of Augustus' ideology and self-representation.

## Evidence not disputed

Among the few undisputed facts regarding the Horologium is that an Egyptian obelisk taken from Heliopolis (near Cairo) was erected, on the orders of Augustus, at a site some 90 m west of the *Ara Pacis* in the year 10/9 B.C. According to the identical inscriptions on

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1 Heslin 2007, 1-2 (quoted). For bibliography and abbreviations, see the end of this article. Buchner's publications of 1976 and 1980 are quoted from their reprint in Buchner 1982a, with added new pagination.

2 I should state that I have been in contact with Edmund Buchner long before our fieldwork converged at the Mausoleum of Augustus during the mid-1990s. Buchner, who expects completion of his manuscript on the Horologium in the near future, has generously kept me informed about his work and is aware of the undertaking presented here. No other details of his latest research are known to me than what is addressed here.